

# Harassing campaign to silence Swedish feminists

Sunday 1 April 2012, by [HJORT Linn](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2012).

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There has been an increase in threats directed against feminists and women who publicly display their aversion towards gender norms in Sweden, according to many feminist writers and activists. This targets the rights of feminists to exist in a democratic society, according to Anna-Klara Bratt, chief editor of the newly started feminist internet newspaper, *Feministiskt Perspektiv*. In a context of growing racism and xenophobia, most clearly expressed in the 2010 elections where the racist party the Swedish Democrats won parliamentary seats for the first time, feminists are also singled out for threats and ridicule.

In late 2011 the *SCUM Manifesto*, written by Valerie Solanas in 1967, was performed in front of several audiences, including school students, in Stockholm. Expressing violent and patronizing attitudes towards [women?], anti-feminist bloggers, conservative men's groups and fathers' rights-groups condemned the performance and arranged a protest demonstration.

The hype around the play soon got out of hand: the women involved were threatened with rape and murder on at least one blog, received numerous threatening e-mails, and had their full names and addresses posted on the internet. An American anti-feminist newspaper followed suit and offered 1000 US dollars to anyone who would reveal the identities of the ensemble (this after having misread the situation and thinking that the women were creating an actual organization based on the *Manifesto*). The police considered the threats so serious that they decided to keep the theatre under surveillance.

In early 2012 a young woman in the audience of a popular singing contest was caught on TV as she cheered with her arms in the air. A young man noticed she had not shaved the hair under her arms; he quickly took a snapshot of the woman and spread the photograph across social networks. Body hair on women has been taboo in Sweden for a couple of decades; within hours the photograph spread further and further, until over a thousand demeaning, threatening and derogatory comments had been directed against the woman.

As a response, a Facebook event was started where hundreds of women displayed their unshaven armpits in support. Soon men (and a few women) entered the event and started bombarding the women (and a few supportive men) with highly explicit, degrading and threatening comments. A number of the women of the event received personal messages containing threats of rape, violence and murder.

These are but two recent examples where women's right to expression and self-expression has been

met with serious displays of hatred. *Feministiskt Perspektiv* decided to track and trace the threats against feminists. Writers and politicians sent the hateful e-mails and letters they had received to the newspaper as part of the research, though many did not want to be named as they feared more persecution.

In the case of the *SCUM Manifesto*, it became clear that notwithstanding the seemingly massive numbers of protests, most emanated from a few connected sources: a couple of anti-feminist blogs, and the above-mentioned men's and father's groups. The researchers found that a small number of bloggers and other anti-feminists, who have managed to coordinate their efforts and polish their rhetoric, were behind the attacks.

However, "[w]ho will actually break through the internet-wall and get out in reality is impossible to tell in advance, but to ignore the warnings, the pitch and the threats when they are in your own mail inbox – would that not be insane?" comments Anna-Klara Bratt in an article commenting on the spread and growth of racist and sexist hatred. She concludes that in the end, the issue is about "the democratic right of feminists to act and exist in a democracy".

In the same debate, several well-known writers point out that the democratic space in Sweden is shrinking. The increased strength of the far right in Europe – Sweden included – is an important case in point.

Writers pointed out that there is a noticeable silence around the attacks on feminists from politicians and from the established media. "All of you who consider yourselves democratically minded, humanist debaters and those in power, you who in different ways manage forums, debating pages, television shows, stage dialogues and more, where we usually debate important issues of justice and democracy, where is your indignation over all the hatred?" asked one Swedish feminist author. Another comments: "If democracy at all shall survive, everyone's freedoms and rights must be defended – even by those on the opposite side of the political scale."

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\* FROM VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 94, MARCH 30, 2012

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/harassing-campaign-to-silence-swedish-feminists.html>



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